

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 LA PAZ 06925 232153Z

12

ACTION ARA-10

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INFO AMEMBASSY ASUNCION

AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L 6925

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, MPOL, MMOL, BL

SUBJECT: CONTROVERSY OVER PROPOSED ARMS ACQUISITIONS

1. SUMMARY: A PROPOSAL THAT THE BOLIVIAN GOVERNMENT EMBARK UPON A MAJOR ARMS ACQUISITION PROGRAM HAS STIMULATED DEBATE AND CONTROVERSY IN LA PAZ POLITICAL CIRCLES. THE PROPOSAL, WHICH IS INCLUDED IN A STUDY PRODUCED BY THE PRIVATE CENTER FOR NATIONAL STUDIES, IS OFFICIALLY REPORTED TO BE "UNDER STUDY" BY THE BANZER GOVERNMENT. BUT UNOFFICIAL COMMENTATORS ON THE STUDY, INCLUDING THE OPPOSITION PDC-PRA-MNRI ALLIANCE, ALREADY HAVE CONDEMNED IT FOR DISTRACTING ATTENTION FROM BOLIVIA'S PRIORITY NEEDS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL STABILITY. END SUMMARY.

2. A BRIEF STUDY ISSUED RECENTLY BY THE PRIVATE CENTER FOR NATIONAL STUDIES (CEN) HAS SPARKED GROWING DEBATE OVER ITS PROPOSAL THAT BOLIVIA EMBARK UPON A MAJOR ARMS ACQUISITION PROGRAM TO STRENGTHEN AND MODERNIZE ITS AIR AND GROUND FORCES. THE STUDY IS BASED UPON THE DOUBLE PREMISE THAT WAR BETWEEN
CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 LA PAZ 06925 232153Z

CHILE AND PERU IS IMMINENT, AND THAT SUCH A WAR WILL

INEVITABLY INVOLVE BOLIVIA AS WELL. THE AUTHORS OF THE CEN PAPER THEN PRESENT FOUR BASIC PROPOSALS DESIGNED TO PREPARE BOLIVIA TO MEET THIS THREATENED SITUATION, INCLUDING (1) A MAJOR ARMAMENT PROGRAM, IN WHICH THE COUNTRY "SHOULD BE WILLING TO USE A LARGE PROPORTION OF ITS PRESENT AND FUTURE INCOME IN ORDER TO INSURE ITS OWN SECURITY". (2) TRAINING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF THE BOLIVIAN PEOPLE, IN ORDER TO PREPARE THEM FOR A POSSIBLE OUTBREAK OF WAR; (3) ACCELERATED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, CONCENTRATING ON WAR-RELATED INDUSTRIES; AND (4) EXPANDED DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVES TO AVERT THE OUTBREAK OF WAR, WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY ADVANCING BOLIVIA'S GOAL OF AN OUTLET TO THE SEA.

3. OFFICIALLY, THE GOVERNMENT OF BOLIVIA HAS STATED THAT THE CEN DOCUMENT IS "UNDER STUDY", AND HAS AVOIDED ANY FORMAL PRONOUNCEMENT ON THE SUBJECT. THE STUDY, WHICH WAS REVIEWED AT MEETINGS OF PRESIDENT BANZER WITH THE CABINET AND THE HIGH COMMAND ON OCTOBER 18, DOES APPEAR TO HAVE STIMULATED SOME CONTROVERSY WITHIN THE MILITARY INSTITUTION. FOLLOWING THE OCTOBER 18 CABINET MEETING, MINISTER OF PLANNING AND COORDINATION LECHIN WAS QUOTED IN THE PRESS AS STATING THAT BOLIVIA'S PRIMARY NEED IS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND ANY INVOLVEMENT IN A REGIONAL ARMS RACE WOULD BE "SENSELESS". ON THE SAME DAY, THE ALTERNATE PRESIDENT OF THE JOINT COMMAND, VICE-ADMIRAL XAVIER PINTO, DECLARED THAT THE ARMED FORCES SHOULD CONSTANTLY MODERNIZE AND STRENGTHEN THEIR EQUIPMENT IN THE INTERESTS OF A MORE EFFECTIVE DEFENSE OF THE BOLIVIAN NATION.

4. UNOFFICIAL REACTION TO THE REPORT HAS TENDED TO CRITICIZE ITS BASIC PREMISE THAT BOLIVIAN INVOLVEMENT IN FUTURE PERU-CHILE CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE, AND ALSO CAST DOUBT UPON THE WISDOM OF DIVERTING SIGNIFICANT RESOURCES AWAY FROM BOLIVIA'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS. THE STRONGEST PUBLIC CRITICISM OF THE CEN DOCUMENT WAS CONTAINED IN A MANIFESTO OF THE OPPOSITION PDC-PRA-MNRI ALLIANCE, WHICH PLACED THE BLAME FOR RECENT TENSIONS IN THE PERU-BOLIVIA-CHILE AREA SOLELY UPON THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT OF CHILE. IN ADDITION, THE MANIFESTO CHALLENGED THE THESIS OF THE CEN THAT "THE ONLY WAY TO PRESERVE THE

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 LA PAZ 06925 232153Z

PEACE IS TO PREPARE ONESELF FOR WAR", CONTENDING THAT PARTICIPATION IN AN ARMS RACE WOULD BE DISASTROUS FOR BOLIVIA. INSTEAD, THE OPPOSITION ALLIANCE CALLED UPON THE ARMED FORCES TO WITHDRAW FROM POLITICAL ACTIVITY AND RETURN TO THEIR PURELY MILITARY FUNCTIONS, WHILE INITIATING A DIALOGUE WITH CIVILIAN GROUPS ON THE COUNTRY'S CURRENT NATIONAL SECURITY PROBLEMS.

5. COMMENT: THE PRESENT CONTROVERSY IS HAVING THE BENEFICIAL EFFECT OF FOCUSING INFORMED BOLIVIAN OPINION ON ONE OF THE KEY QUESTIONS AFFECTING THE COUNTRY'S FOREIGN POLICY. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN, HOWEVER, WHETHER THE BANZER GOVERNMENT WILL DECIDE TO CONTRIBUTE POSITIVELY TO THE DEBATE THROUGH THE PUBLICATION OF DOUCMENTS RECENTLY PREPARED BY ITS MARITIME COMMISSION, WHICH REPORTEDLY ANALYZE POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR THE REGAINING OF BOLIVIAN ACCESS TO THE SEA. IN ANY EVENT, THE CEN REPORT IS SYMPTOMATIC OF A RISING LEVEL OF CONCERN AMONG WELL INFORMED CIVILIANS AND MILITARY OFFICERS WITHIN RECENT MONTHS OVER THE CONSEQUENCES FOR BOLIVIA OF A POSSIBLE PERU-CHILE CONFLICT.

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